

Chris Woods, *Sudden Justice: America's Secret Drone Wars*. Oxford, U.K., New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. XVI, 386. ISBN 978-0-19-02059-0.

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Much has already been written about the killing technology built into Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA) or, most commonly, drones. In *Sudden Justice*, Chris Woods does cover material already in print; but he takes this literature to a new level by focusing on the complex interactions between machines and humans. The latter include operatives, targets and other victims, as well as political defenders and opponents of the burgeoning program. He approaches his topic as an investigative journalist (funded for this project by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, a London NGO). As such, he gathered much of the material for his book by seeking out and interviewing as many actively or formerly involved individuals as he could, be their involvement on the sending or receiving end of the drones and be they safely ensconced in the US, the UK, or wherever, or in sometimes counterattacked drone-managing bases abroad, in officially identified warzones, or in any extra-warzone place also being targeted because of US or others' disapproval of someone among its inhabitants. In reporting his findings Woods intersperses mostly documented factual data with various individuals' comments, all of which taken together point to a serious lacuna in military rules of engagement with regard to both warzone and beyond-the-battlefield civilian casualties.

The book's method of presentation is basically historical (mainly over the first decade and a half of this century) but thematically it is issue-oriented. As for history, first we learn regarding drones how they came to be and how they have been used over battlefields. Then we learn about targeted killing, first on a limited basis in Yemen and Palestine, then more expansively in Afghanistan and Pakistan, then in Iraq, Libya, and Somalia. Key operatives throughout this developmental program were the American CIA and Air Force and several allied agencies especially in the UK. Earlier bans on such killings were modified during George W. Bush's second term; and then the Obama administration elevated the program into a major component of its foreign policy, where it remains to this day.

Development of killer drones. During the period Woods covers, the principal unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), or RPAs, were the older Predator MQ-1 and the more advanced Reaper MQ-9, both of which are now being replaced by still more advanced devices (p. 3). Together they carried out some 2,500 drone strikes of which some two-thirds were on the conventional battlefields of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya (p. 4). For killing missions they typically carry and release Hellfire missiles, which are lightweight (154 lb.) anti-tank weapons that can be laser-guided onto their targets (pp. 39-40). Both were produced by San Diego based General Atomics

Aeronautical Systems, Inc.

(GA-ASI for short), which has been the recipient of billions of tax-payer dollars and is presently in advanced development stage of Avenger, a jet-powered drone (p. 27). This company first came into prominence during the Clinton administration when CIA director James Woolsey inter-connected his agency's talents with those of GA and the Pentagon's newly established Defense Airborne Reconnaissance Office (DARO) to develop GA's Gnat prototype into what became the Predator. The Predator, in turn, did revolutionary intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) over war-torn Bosnia. And after Bosnia new technology did away with the need for pilots and analysts to be stationed near the battlefield (pp. 32-35).

Principal US drone operations centers. The two principal agencies involved in drone use are the CIA and the US Air Force. With remoteness no longer a problem, the former's drone program is administered by Distributed Ground System (DGS) One, which is based at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia, and at locations on several continents. The latter is watched over by the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force, located at Bagram Air Base, and the Air Force Special Operations Command, located at Cannon Air Force Base in New Mexico. The actual running of killer drones is done primarily under CIA jurisdiction by Air Force members of the 17th RS (Reconnaissance Squadron), which is located at Creech Air Force Base near Las Vegas.

On September 7, 2000, DGS One at Langley started "Afghan Eyes" to do ISR in Afghanistan. Five years later elite airmen in the Air Force Operations Command were chosen for an independent drone force to be called the 3rd Special Operations Squadron and over time they were equipped with their own MQ-1 fleet (p. 77). A year after that the Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) placed its entire drone intelligence program into a Florida-based entity called the 11th Intelligence Squadron which within two years was handling half of all videos from major battle zones (pp. 79-80).

Drone-related issues. The first issue Woods addresses directly is the US constitution-challenging killing of Western, including US, citizens whose numbers and/or names are listed in an appendix. Then roughly the second half of the book articulates a variety of unresolved problems and controversies with regard to drone killing of civilians. These include: (gradually ameliorated) indifference to civilian fatalities (especially on the part of the CIA in Pakistan); the psychological and emotional effect of remote killing work on the personnel so engaged; the inevitable tendency of targeted killing of civilians to arouse counter-measures that cost American lives and undermine efforts to win hearts and minds of people who are themselves on a signature list or who might perchance find themselves in proximity to someone who is; the pro-human rights UN and international NGOs' condemnation of the killing of civilians, especially those located beyond any designated battlefield; and, finally, the US government's adamant yet

supercilious defense of globally scattered killings on no basis more persuasive than its insistence that such killings are in America's national interest.

Justification of US targeted killings. President Ford's Executive Order 11905 placed a ban on assassinations by US agencies. This left a loophole for proxy killings by contractors; but eventually Presidents Reagan and Carter extended the ban to them as well (p. 47). These restrictions lost support after the 9/11/2001 catastrophe, to which Bush II responded with a War on Terror which it alleged was neither type of war recognized by international law, i.e., (1) between two or more sovereign states or (2) between a nation-state and insurgents within its borders (p. 63). Within a week of 9/11 Congress passed the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Terrorists (AUMF), which is aimed literally just at "nations, organizations, or persons" in any way involved in that event; but it has remained the basis for increasingly widespread and controversial targetings.

This is manifest, for example, in Obama counterterrorism specialist John Brennan's 2012-04-30 speech entitled "The Ethics and Efficacy of the President's Counterterrorism Strategy." Two months later 26 lawmakers complained that civilian lives were at risk because "our drone campaigns already have virtually no transparency, accountability or oversight." This eventually inspired Obama to release a rigorous-sounding document entitled "U.S. Policy Standards and Procedures for the Use of Force in Counterterrorism Operations Outside the United States and Areas of Active Hostilities." By then, however, the process of selecting drone targets had been brought into the White House, where Brennan's staff proposed and Obama himself did the choosing. As will be seen below, many knowledgeable experts including former drone operators are especially critical of targeting individuals who are outside any clearly designated warzone (pp. 285-287). In response to such criticisms, however, Obama spokespersons say the deaths in question aren't war-related because the US has no troops on the ground where they occurred (p. 208). Moreover, they counter any attempt to challenge the program in court with maximum "obstruction and obfuscation" (p. 284).¹

Targets of drone killings. When drones first became viable instruments of killing, the US used them against the enemies of the moment, that is, Afghan insurgents and their Pakistani allies. In 2005, though, drones killed two Spaniards and their families and subsequently two Canadians in Waziristan (pp. 131-132). At some point, perhaps in 2008, Bush and Cheney loosened restraints on targeting Westerners (p. 133). In 2009 Obama took office and Westerners became fairly common targets (pp. 289-290). In 2010 an Australian and a New Zealander were drone-killed,

¹The issues here reflected are examined at length in Mary Ellen O'Connell, ed., *What Is War? An Investigation in the Wake of 9/11*, International Humanitarian Law Series Vol. 37, Leiden/Boston: Brill/Nijhoff, 2012.

and a year later two Britons in Somalia. A year later Obama changed a longstanding policy in Iraq and directed that drones now be used there not just for surveillance but for targeted killings (p. 200).

Concern for civilian lives. Woods reports that concern for civilian lives has become an ever more important policy consideration over the years. But secrecy as to data remains strong and the CIA remains especially callous in this regard. A microcosm of the issue is a village in Yemen, where a US cruise missile killed 44 civilians just a week after Obama picked up his Peace Prize in Oslo (p. 240). At the time up to 30 civilians could be killed without pre-approval; but in time that number was lowered to only 6 and then to 1 (p. 241). These restraints fall by the wayside, however, if there is a Troops in Contact (TIC) situation. In such a case self-defense Rules of Engagement apply and Escalation of Force (EOF) is called for. It is the case nonetheless that British forces kill far fewer civilians than do US forces, in part because they follow stricter Rules of Engagement and use Reapers only on conventional battlefields (pp. 88-92, 246). As for US data, The UN has reported a tripling of civilian casualties year-on-year in 2013; but except for a brief period of openness CENTCOM has insisted that such information must be “classified in the interest of national security” (p. 249).²

The foregoing policies are at least rationally defensible, in contrast to the CIA’s reliance on ultimate bamboozlement in lieu of any rational policy regarding its responsibility for civilian deaths. Its first line of defense is denial of charges and ridicule of anyone so charging. In 2011, though, an NGO presented evidence that the CIA had killed 390 civilians to date. The CIA didn’t challenge that number but explained that all deaths cited were of military-aged males (MAM). This label is very dangerous to any person in a drone-monitored area who is a “voluntary human shield” or whom anyone that matters prefers dead.

Psychological impact on operators. Woods provides a detailed account of the psychological effects of remote targeting on the military personnel who carry it out (ch. 8). Boredom is a common side-effect, at times secretly mitigated by bringing into the workplace online games – one of which resulted in an electronic “sneak attack” on the system. Another challenge is too much overtime due to having too few volunteers. And that problem is due in part to the fact that the job itself is not viewed favorably by military leadership and, accordingly, is seldom the subject of honors or awards.

Countermeasures. It would seem that in one respect persons actively engaged in high-tech

²At a number of places in this book the author acknowledges a failure to obtain some data or documents as of the time the book was going to press. A mark of the responsible journalist, of course, but also an indication of how strenuously relevant information is being concealed.

killing would take comfort at being located far from their targets. For, those targeted are fast learners and as such have mastered many ways to counterattack the drone brigades (ch. 12). This responsiveness most often involves finding and shooting or blowing up spies on the ground. By 2009, their kills numbered over 100 in Pakistan and some 250 in Afghanistan (p. 271). Many were caught by means of specially developed tracking devices. A Russian product known as SkyGrabber is also useful in tracking older drones; and for those more advanced Al Qaeda is working on jammers that interfere with GPS signals and infrared tags and (why not?) on their own drones (pp. 274-275). Then, too, they do straightforward attacks on close-to-target Allies' bases, e.g., a US naval base in Karachi, a British camp in Helmand province, and another facility in Yemen. Along these lines, when the CIA allegedly killed 80 students, mostly children, in Chingai, Pakistan, a suicide bomber retaliated by killing 42 Pakistani soldiers in Dargai (pp. 93-96).

Though taking up less than a third of this book's pages, the issue of killing occupants of countries regarding whom the US (or one of its allies) is not even tacitly in a state of war is arguably the acme of Woods' research findings. Earlier on he has devoted much attention to the policies and practices associated with the killing of civilians in areas openly identified as part of a given warzone. And his major concern regarding such killing is its understandable tendency to generate targeted people's increasingly negative attitude towards the perpetrating US government. After making a case that this practice is a strategic blunder, mainly by quoting numerous former participants whom he has interviewed, Woods turns his attention towards the end of the book to killings effected without regard to any military confrontation as such, that is, with no US boots (or as he puts it in one place, spies) on the ground. His modus operandi is not that of an ethicist; but his moral concern with regard to these matters is manifest, especially in the way he cites UN and other spokespersons who openly declare such killings murder. With this assessment on the record, he posits in closing that the money and manpower already committed to the military drone industry give us every reason to expect perpetuation of this effectively amoral approach to global problem solving (p. 288).